

Notes on Roman Religion and Religious Practices
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I. A Very Brief History of Rome and Roman Religion

Early Rome

Romans believed that Rome was founded in 753 BCE by the twin sons of Mars, Romulus and Remus. Although Romulus and Remus are legend, scholars do believe that in the eighth century BCE, several small Latin hill towns established a meeting place at a crossing of the Tiber River. This meeting place would grow into the city of Rome. Rome was ruled by a series of kings until the last king was overthrown in 509 BCE and Rome became a Republic.¹

Early Roman religion was a mixture of animistic and polytheistic beliefs. Early Romans believed that divine spirits inhabited certain natural elements such as rivers and they believed in a number of gods including some gods originally associated with the Greek pantheon.

Roman religion developed from at least three different sources. Early Romans were descendants of several waves of Indo-European peoples that had migrated to the Italian peninsula as early as 2000 BCE. The Indo-European people that settled along the lower Tiber River were called Latins. Etruscans, a non-Indo European people migrated to central Italy during the 9th Century BCE. The Etruscans probably came from Asia Minor and brought aspects of Greek religion that they had modified with them. In 600 BCE, the Etruscans took control of Rome, and although Rome remained an independent city-state, its last three kings were Etruscan. Finally, Greek settlers and traders moved into southern Italy after 750 BCE. They also brought classical Greek religious practices with them.²

Because the early Latins did not have a writing system and the Etruscan written language is not yet understood, little is known about the origins and beliefs of Latin and Etruscan religion. In contrast, the gods of classical Greece who were also syncretized into Roman religious practice are easily recognized. For example, the god Mars, who would become the preeminent god of the Roman State began as the melding of an earlier Latin god of vegetation and agriculture called Mars with Ares, the Greek god of war. Little is known of the origin of the original Mars but much is known, through the writings and art of Greece, of Ares, the god of war.

The Roman Republic

Roman patricians deposed the last king in 509 BCE and formed a republic governed by a Senate, a gathering of older patrician men who annually elected two consuls

¹ See Wallbank, Civilization Past and Present p. 65.

² *Ibid.* p. 65-66.

from among their ranks. Over time, the plebian class demanded more power and as in most democracies, power was shared, diverse, and unwieldy.³ Religious ritual, the taking the auspices, and the propitiation of the gods became the glue that held the Republic together. Romans believed that public and private religious practice was essential to the survival of the state. During the Republic, Rome conquered the entire Italian peninsula, parts of Gaul, the Middle East, Sicily, Carthage, Judea, and Egypt. Each of these conquests challenged, changed and expanded Roman religious belief.

The Roman Empire

The Republic lasted until 45 BCE when General Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon into Italy with his army, a violation of Roman law punishable by death. Caesar's view was that defeating his rival Pompey and making himself a dictator was the only way to bring stability to the Republic, which was racked by political infighting, indecision, and paralysis. Caesar was soon assassinated by a group of Senators who hoped to reestablish the Republic. But civil war broke out instead. War continued until 27 BCE when Caesar Augustus became the first Roman Emperor.

The establishment of the Empire and the elevation of a single man as supreme, unchallenged ruler tied Roman religion even more closely to the state. At the same time, the elevation of the Emperor to almost divine status cheapened the spiritual believability of the religion and drove many people to Christianity and Mithraism. The *pax Romana* allowed Christian missionaries to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire despite sometimes brutal persecution. At the same time, Judea revolted in part because several emperors demanded that the Jews worship Roman gods. Judea was destroyed and Jews were disbursed throughout the Roman world, further spreading not only the idea of monotheism, but also the idea of the separation of religion from the state.

In 306 CE, Constantine became emperor. He would eventually embrace Christianity as the state religion and begin the dismantlement of traditional Roman religious practices. Although the Roman Empire would theoretically continue until 410 CE when the Visigoths attacked and destroyed Rome, for our purposes, Roman religion and culture ends with Constantine.

Rome enjoyed roughly 1100 years of continuity. But during this time, it conquered many different peoples and often disbursed these conquered peoples either as slaves, soldiers, or traders throughout the Empire. These people took not only their own gods but also their myths and fundamental spiritual outlooks with them on their journeys.⁴ Because Romans, like most people in the ancient world, were polytheistic they did not necessarily reject these imported gods as false. Instead, these foreign gods were often syncretized with older Roman gods or were coopted in their entirety into the Roman pantheon, sometimes

³ *Ibid.* p. 66-67.

⁴ Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy*, p. 270.

the major cult statue of the foreign god being brought to Rome and installed in a new and grander temple.

II. Cicero's Three Aspects of Roman Religion⁵

Writing in *The Roman* thinker and writer, Cicero describes three aspects of Roman Religion: Ritual, auspices, and prophecy. Ritual, or *sacra*, included the worship of gods and spirits, sacrifice, the observance of festivals, and temple building and maintenance. Sacred Roman art almost always comes from the ritual part of Roman religion.

Auspices were the interpretation of the movement of birds in flight or the feeding patterns of caged birds such as chickens. Augurs were priests who were trained to take the auspices. Augury was not intended to tell the future but to ask whether a planned course of action had the approval of the gods. Taking the auspices was absolutely necessary before any important endeavor from marriage to a battle. The failure to take the auspices or the misreading or ignoring of the auspices was often blamed for lost battles, shipwrecks, and other disasters.

Not mentioned by Cicero, but important none-the-less, haruspices were diviners used to interpret the will of the gods. Originally of Etruscan origin, haruspices interpreted the liver and gallbladder from sacrificed animals, unusual births and growths, and lightening. Although haruspices did not have the official status of the auspices, their influence grew throughout the Republic and into the Empire.

Prophecy, the third aspect of Roman religion according to Cicero, included oracles such as the oracle of Apollo at Delphi and the Sibylline books. The Sibylline books were a collection of writings bought by the state from a prophetess named Sibyl. The Sibylline books were consulted for answers in times of state crisis. Although the original Sibylline books were destroyed by fire in 83 BCE, a new collection of texts was made from other copies and housed in Rome until the 4th Century CE. Early Christians took the Sibylline books, Christianized their passages, and treated them as equal to the Old Testament. A sample of one of the fourteen remaining Christianized oracles gives a taste of what the original Sibylline books may have been like.

*And that I might to mortals prophesy
Of mysteries divine. ...others say
That I'm a Sibyl, born of mother Circe
And father Gnostos raving mad and false;
But at that time when all things come to pass
Ye shall remember me, and no one more
Shall call me mad, the great God's prophetess,
For he showed me what happened formerly
To my ancestors; what things were the first.*

⁵ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 3.5, 45 BCE.

*Those God made known to me; and in my mind
Did God put all things to be afterwards,
That I might prophesy of things to come,
And things that were, and tell them unto men.*

III. General Roman Religious Practices and Beliefs

Priests and Priestesses

Priesthoods were often held for life but were not full time jobs with a few exceptions such as the vestal virgins and the oracle priestesses. Priests often also held high-ranking military and secular positions.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice was a central part of all Roman religion. Romans believed in the *Do et des* principle: I give (sacrifice) so that you (the Gods) *may* give to me. A sacrifice may be made with the promise of an additional sacrifice if the god sought after outcome occurred. Sacrifices could be bloodless or blood. Bloodless sacrifices were most common and usually included food, garlands, flowers, money, a statue, the building of a temple or anything of value. Blood sacrifices were of perfect, young, domestic animals that were killed on an altar either outside a temple or at another sacred spot. Part of the meat was burned as sacrifice but most was consumed during feasts or by the populace. Slaves usually performed the sacrifice although it was overseen by a priest. With both sacrifice and ritual, the deed needed to be done perfectly for the gods to accept the sacrifice and ritual. Likewise, only people without deformities could be priests and priestesses.

The Afterlife

The view of the afterlife for Romans was as complex and contradictory as the view today. On the one hand, Romans told stories about Hades, the Greek underworld. On the other hand, Romans believed that although the spirit lived on after death, it was tied to the earth and haunted the area around the tomb. Therefore, the spirits of one's ancestors had to be propitiated with periodic offerings and acknowledgement or they would work evil in the living family. Finally, during the Empire, the Senate voted to deify most Caesars and some of their wives after their death, essentially turning them into gods. This, of course, implies the belief of the possibility of eternal life after death and puts the power of determining eternal life in the hands of a secular body of men instead of the gods.

Deification of Mortals

The deification of humans was prevalent in the Mediterranean world. The Egyptians believed that the Pharaoh was a god and the Persians treated their king as a god. Alexander was hailed as a god after he conquered areas that previously held this belief although

legend records that Alexander's Macedonian generals did not approve of his deification. The Romans probably did not originally have the tradition of turning humans into gods. However, by the 4th Century BCE, the story of Romulus' deification had been written down and as the Romans conquered further east, they sometimes accepted the idea of the deification of great men.

Julius Caesar was the first Caesar to be deified after his death. Julius' heir, Octavian, began to call himself the son of a god, and slowly granted himself and his family honors that was normally reserved for the gods, including calling himself Augustus, meaning well-augured, or consecrated by augurs. Augustus also built a temple for his family's Genius so that all Romans could worship his family's ancestors as if they were worshipping their own. The worship of Augustus' Genius became the cult of the Augustales. The cult of the Augustales welcomed freed slaves, merchants, and other up and coming non-aristocrats thus creating a body of support for Augustus outside of the traditional aristocracy. Although during his reign, Tiberius, Augustus' heir, rejected Julius', and Augustus' movement toward deification, except for truly evil rulers such as Caligula, all the Caesars and sometimes their wives and mothers, were deified upon their deaths.⁶

IV. Types of Roman Religious Practices

The State Religion

The state religion was required of all citizens to keep the state strong. This included the worship of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva and later the deification of the Caesars. The state religion was supported by the state.

Traditional Deities

The worship of Greek, Etruscan, and Italic Traditional Deities: The Romans incorporated the gods of conquered peoples into their own pantheon. These gods were worshipped in temples and may or may not be supported by the state.

Foreign Cults

Foreign cults made their way into Roman culture usually via conquest. These included the worship of Isis, Mithras, and Dionysus. The state was often suspicious of and sought to suppress these cults because their initiation rituals and exclusivity undermined the civic-religious connection of traditional Roman worship. However, the cults of Isis and Mithras, in particular, openly built temples throughout the Roman world.

Family/Localized worship

Families and neighborhoods were expected to sacrifice to their local and family gods and to their ancestors.

⁶ See Warrior, Roman Religion, p. 106-118.

Superstition

The Romans were superstitious people. Children wore amulets to protect them from harm. Images of Priapus, the god of fertility, or just his enlarged genitalia were found all over Pompeii in paintings, lamps, or scratched into the pavement. It is believed the Priapus was a good luck symbol.

Monotheistic Religions

Judaism and Christianity posed unique problems for the Roman world. Like the foreign cults, both religions had initiation and exclusivity practices that separated their practitioners from the civic camaraderie and requirements necessary to maintain the organization of the Roman state. But even more problematic, practitioners of these monotheistic religions refused to participate in the state and traditional religious practices that Romans deemed necessary to keep the gods on the side of the Romans. Thus, according to the Roman state, not only did Jews and Christians threaten the order of Roman society, they also threatened to anger the gods so much that they would abandon the Empire.

V. The Origins of Some Anthropomorphic Roman Gods

Aesculapius

Greek god of healing. Imported in 292 BCE at the advice of the Sybilline books at the time of a great plague. Brought from Greece in the form of a snake.

Apollo

May have begun as a Roman god of healing but later assimilated with the Greek Apollo of Delphi.

Ceres

Ancient Italo-Roman goddess of growth, often identified with the Greek Demeter.

Cybele

Anatolian mother goddess, imported to Roman and worshipped at Magna Mater. The Roman's brought an important statue of Cybele back to Rome in 204 BCE and incorporated her into the Roman pantheon of gods. The Romans rejected the more exotic eastern aspect of the worship of Cybele, namely, the castration of her priests. Her consort was Attis and at least while still in Anatolia, she had eunuch priests called Galli.

Diana

Italian goddess often identified with the Greek Artemis.

Dionysus

Same as the Greek Dionysus and also called Bacchus. Identified in the 5th century BCE with the Roman god Liber Pater. The early Roman state attempted to restrict the worship of Bacchus. The cult of Bacchus originally was open only to women and involved an initiation. Worshippers of Bacchus separated themselves from civil society. This challenged the Roman state where loyalty to the state or the civic culture was of paramount importance. At times the illegal worship of Bacchus could lead to the death penalty.

Genius

Unknown origin but no Greek equivalent. A Genius was a god unique to a family or clan. The serpent often seen painted on Lararia may represent the Genius.⁷

Hercules

Heracles in Greek. Began as a Greek hero. Son of Zeus and Alcmena, a mortal woman. Because of his mortal mother, Hera hated Hercules and sought to destroy him. Hercules was transformed into a god by Zeus because of his great feats.

Isis

Imported from Egypt during the early first century BCE. Like Bacchus, the cult of Isis was suppressed initially because its initiation practices threatened the cohesiveness of the civic culture. By 43 CE, the worship of Isis was apparently sanctioned, or at least tolerated, by the state because a temple to Isis was built near the forum in Pompeii.⁸

Janus

Ancient Italic god. God of doors, gates, openings, and beginnings. Shown with two heads facing two directions. No Greek equivalent.

Juno

Ancient Italic deity. Worshipped as Juno Regina (queen), Juno Sospita (protector) and Juno Lucina (childbirth). Often identified with the Greek Hera. Juno was the goddess of the city of Veii, a city in southern Italy. Juno's statue was brought to Rome from Veii after the Romans defeated the people of Veii in 396 BCE. During the siege of Veii, the Romans had prayed to Juno and promised her a great temple in Rome if she abandoned Veii.

Jupiter

⁷ See Rawson, Children and Childhood in Roman Italy, p. 109. *But see*, Berry, The Complete Pompeii, p. 207.

⁸ Berry, The Complete Pompeii, p. 204-206.

From the Greek *Zeus Pater* "God the Father." Worshipped in Rome from at least the 4th Century BCE. Jupiter came to represent the might of Rome and the Roman state. Jupiter was worshiped as Jupiter Optimus Maximus in a temple shared with Juno and Minerva on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. Generals dressed as Jupiter during their triumphal parade. Jupiter's attribute was an eagle.

Lar

The origin of the Lar is unknown although there is apparently no Greek equivalent. A Lar presided over a place: A house, a city, or a neighborhood. Artistic depictions generally show two Lares together.

Mars

Originally the Latin god of vegetation and agriculture. Later Mars merged with Ares, the Greek god of war to become Mars, the Roman god of war.

Mercury

Probably of Latin tradition but later merged with the Greek Hermes. Mercury was the god of trade and commerce.

Minerva

Began as the Latin deity of handicrafts but merged with the Greek goddess Athena. Along with Jupiter and Juno, represented the Roman state.

Mithras

The origin of Mithras is obscure although it probably derived from an Indo-Iranian deity. Mithras became popular about 100 CE among Roman soldiers and traders. The cult of Mithras was only open to men and appealed mainly to the lower classes. Little literary evidence of Mithraism survives. Rites were conducted in a Mithraeum, a small, dark, cave like space decorated with signs from the cosmos. The Tauroctony, or Mithras' slaying of the bull, is the primary icon found in Mithraea.

Neptune

Italic god of water later conflated with the Greek god Poseidon, god of the ocean.

Penates

The origin is unknown although there does not appear to be a Greek equivalent. The Penates was a god of the pantry, or *penus* in Latin.

Quirinus

Probably of Sabine origin. Later associated with the deified Romulus, one of the founders

of Rome. According to ancient stories, Romulus was on a dais surrounded by Senators during a public assembly when a storm arose suddenly, a cloud covered him, and took him to heaven. The people decided that Romulus should be deified.

Venus

From the Greek Aphrodite.

Vesta

Vesta was the living flame and also the goddess of the hearth. Vesta has little resemblance to Hestia, the Greek goddess of the hearth. Vesta is not an anthropomorphic goddess, as she has no human form. The vestal virgins were the priestesses of Vesta. Vestal virgins were chosen from a young age from among the daughters of the upper class. The girls were removed from their parents and lived at the temple to Vesta as virgins until after their 30 year term of office had ended.⁹

⁹ See Warrior, Roman Religion, p. 45.

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